

Garamendi stirs fervor for UC Merced med school

Lieutenant governor's plan could make UC Merced the fastest fast-track medical school in the country

By DANIELLE GAINES

dgaines@mercedsun-star.com

Friday, Jan. 09, 2009

FRESNO -- You don't want to put the availability of health care in the San Joaquin Valley up against most places -- not other areas of California, not even third-world countries, Lt. Gov. John Garamendi said.

"But let's do it. Let's get angry," he said Thursday evening at an event to unveil his revised plan for a medical education program at UC Merced. "And let's demand that these issues are addressed."

San Joaquin Valley residents have the least access to physicians per capita of any region in California. On average, there are 302 physicians per 100,000 people in California. In the Valley, the number of physicians plunges to 173 per 100,000.

Garamendi presented the plan in the Fresno High School auditorium to about 100 medical professionals, potential medical students, parents and others intrigued by the idea. Absent an alternative to a higher-cost conventional medical school, Garamendi said, it is likely the Merced medical school will be delayed and perhaps never open at all as the state's budget crisis mounts.

His revised plan for the medical school would start freshman students in a medical curriculum right away, eliminate their summer vacations and send graduates into residency programs after just five years at the campus.

Similarly quick medical degree programs are not new in the United States, but UC Merced would become the fastest fast-track medical school in the country. (A traditional medical education requires a four-year bachelor's degree, at least three years in med school, and a three-to-six year residency.)

Garamendi said that the need for care in the Valley has long been overlooked.

"My first act of legislation, in '76, was the Rural Health Act of California," Garamendi said. "After all these many, many years, we still have a profound problem in the Central Valley."

And now, support for a medical school at the 2,700-student campus is dwindling as well, another lawmaker said.

"There is a general concern that the UC is wavering in its commitment -- not at the regent level, but it has been seen by many of us working on this project in the past several weeks," Rep. Dennis Cardoza said. "We have been very disappointed. No official action has been taken by the regents, but the back-channel communication is less supportive than it should have been."

Cardoza has been a staunch advocate of the school since its conception, setting up an advocacy group to bring the medical school to UC Merced and talking to legislators as much as possible about the effort, he said.

UC Merced has already invested significant time and money in the planning of the medical school. The university has authored a 96-page program proposal and business plan, named Maria Pallavicini vice provost for health sciences and commissioned a feasibility report from the Washington Advisory Group, a consulting firm. (The lieutenant governor's son, John Garamendi Jr., works as the vice chancellor for University Relations at UC Merced.)

"There are a lot of health problems in the San Joaquin Valley, and they are not going away," said UC spokeswoman Brandy Nikaido, who was present at the event. "In these economic times, we need to think of creative approaches to provide a medical education. The lieutenant governor's proposal is one of many creative approaches and we look forward to hearing more

details."

There is still overwhelming support for a medical school in Merced from all sectors of the community. Doctors say more care is needed and they will help in the quest. Lawmakers from the city to the national level regularly speak about the planning process for the school. Some residents are even looking forward to applying to the program.

Oscar Sabian, a doctor who has practiced in Firebaugh for 25 years, came to the meeting in Fresno to express his support for the school.

"We deserve to have it," he said of the medical school. "It is about time the state pays attention to the Central Valley."

Sabian said his own two sons attended school out of state and could have spared themselves a significant debt if they had studied locally. One of his sons has more than \$150,000 in debt, he said.

Under the Garamendi plan, the school would use existing local resources to further reduce costs to students.

The new Mercy Medical Center Merced across the street from campus would be treating patients in early 2010. A new allied health sciences building at Merced College is slated to open for instruction next fall. Both are within shouting distance of UC Merced.

Merced College President Ben Duran said a resource-sharing plan hadn't yet been created, but he remained open to the idea.

"We have always indicated to the university that we would work closely with them to do whatever it takes to get a medical school up and running," Duran said. "I am not sure how this new plan would work, but I am eager to see the specifics."

Garamendi said he will continue to seek support for his plan and asked the attendees at the meeting to do the same.

"My task, all of our tasks is to make this a reality," he said. "Not a possibility. A reality."

Garamendi is a UC regent and plans to run for governor of California in 2010.

Reporter Danielle Gaines can be reached at (209) 385-2407 or dgaines@mercedsun-star.com